DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 327 833 CS 010 390

AUTHOR Worthington, Jim
TITLE Reading Groups: Problems, Solutions.
PUB DATE May 91
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (36th, Las Vegas, NV, May 6-10, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Ability Grouping; *Classroom Environment; Classroom Research; Cooperative Learning; Elementary Education; Large Group Instruction; *Reading Instruction; Reading Research; Small Group Instruction; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

The practice of grouping children of similar ability for reading instruction is as much a part of the classroom as the chalkboard, yet for decades research into classroom practice has raised serious questions about ability grouping. A research project using the meta-analysis approach to analyze more than 50 research studies concluded that ability grouping does not enhance student achievement in the elementary school. Some teachers have used the traditional high, average, and low ability reading groups simply to be able to manage the classroom. A variety of alternative grouping procedures are widely practiced in classrooms for math, social studies, and science, but rarely for reading. It is almost as if reading is too important to tamper with, so teachers and administrators feel constrained to stick to familiar, if less effective, practice. Teachers should vary their grouping arrangements as they move toward whole group instruction and away from the traditional three ability groups. The great need is for balance across classroom grouping arrangements, not a wholesale abandonment of small group instruction in favor of whole groups. The problem of ability grouping can be solved with a careful use of a variety of grouping strategies including whole group instruction, teacher-led and peer-led small group instruction and careful selection of individual learning activities. (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED327833

READING GROUPS: PROBLEMS, SOLUTIONS

Jim Worthington

The practice of grouping children of similar ability for reading instruction is as much a part of the classroom as the chalkboard. The names for reading groups have changed over the years- perhaps you were a bluebird or a robin- but because the procedure of organizing children into high, average and low ability groups is so widespread it remains largely unquestioned.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
James D. Worthington
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

PROBLEMS:

Yet, for decades research into classroom practice has raised serious questions about ability grouping. Empirical evidence and court decisions suggest that tracking and ability grouping are generally ineffective and, for many children, harmful (Oakes and Lipton, 1990). Specifically, the meta-analysis approach has been used to analyze more than 50 research studies and concluded that ability grouping does not enhance student achievement in the elementary school (Slavin, 1986).

CS010390

First, children's self esteem is closely tied to their placement in the classroom hierarchy of reading groups (Oakes, 1985). Those in the middle and lower groups quickly feel that

they are less able than their classmates (Kulik and Kulik, 1982). Some researchers suggest those in the high group develop an inflated view of themselves and their abilities (Hiebert and Fisher, 1990). Moreover, studies of those in small, heterogenous, cooperative classroom groups provide additional evidence that the achievement of high-ability students actually can be enhanced in heterogenous settings (Slavin 1983; Webb, 1982).

Second, ability group placement usually becomes permanent. Ability group placement actually widens the gap in achievement between students in the top and bottom groups over time (Goodlad, 1983). When they reach high school, those children from the first-grade low group tend to appear in the vocational track classes. Thus, instructors tend to lock students into long-term success or failure (Rosenbaum, 1976; Oakes and Lipton, 1990).

This tendency is not surprising because the experiences of the low-ability group and of the high-ability group in the same classroom are quite different. Better readers read more and, are interrupted less. They spend more time on higher-level comprehension skills and less time on lower-level decoding skills (Hiebert, 1983). Still, the practice of ability grouping continues to dominate in both public and private classrooms.

Some of the blame must be shared by Schools of Education and the publishers. Since there is a whole generation of teachers who have graduated from teacher preparation programs that advocated grouping students into three ability groups for reading instruction, the publishers give them what they want.

Some teachers have used three reading groups simply to be able to manage the classroom. Many reading programs recommend the instructor teach to three ability groups. School districts adopt these programs, and teachers are required to teach from them. Teachers and administrators assume that ability groups offer the best way for a teacher to manage the reading instruction of 24 to 35 young children.

The practice has been so accepted that educators are just beginning to acknowledge the years of research that convincingly condemn ability grouping. Becoming a Nation of Readers, the comprehensive 1985 Report of the Commission on Reading, comes to the obvious conclusion: "Because of the severe problems inherent in ability grouping, the commission believes that educators should explore other options for reading instruction."

Such options, in fact, abound for other subjects. A variety of alternative grouping procedures are widely practiced in classrooms for math, social studies and science, but rarely for reading (Hiebert and Fisher, 1990). It's almost as if reading

is too important to tamper with, so teachers and administrators feel constrained to stick to a familiar, if less effective, practice.

Teachers can present concepts and skills to a whole class and then gear follow-up work to differing needs and abilities of individual students. With this whole group instruction, every child is an equal member of the group, and every child benefits from participating with the full range of students (Hiebert and Fisher, 1990).

The cooperative learning group recently has generated lots of interest. It's a small group of students representing a cross section of abilities. The teacher organizes instruction so members of each group share responsibility for helping each other learn and for completing assignments cooperatively. More than 50 research studies have concluded that cooperative learning groups consistently achieve more than do students in traditionally structured classes (Stevens et al., 1986).

Researchers at Johns Hopkins University studied the effects of Cooperative Integrated Reading and Comprehension (CIRC) on 3rd and 4th graders' reading comprehension, reading vocabulary, language mechanics, language expression, and spelling. They concluded that the students in the CIRC program performed better than a control group (three-ability groups/basal reader) on standardized measures of reading, language and spelling.

The CIRC students also performed better on writing samples and oral reading assessment (Stevens et al., 1986).

We can't really blame teachers for the problem of ability reading groups. Principals need to provide a supportive environment where teachers can move toward whole group instruction and the inservice training to provide alternatives to ability grouping.

Retraining of teachers is the key to solving the problem of reading groups. They need staff development programs that will show them how to teach reading with a whole class and still meet the individual needs of students through cooperative learning groups and other flexible grouping strategies.

The whole language/literature based movement is causing a revolution in instructional practices. According to Hiebert and Fisher (1990), grouping patterns in whole language classrooms are very different from the three-group structure found during formal reading instruction. However, to their alarm, their observations of classrooms revealed no occasions when students in whole language classrooms met with their teacher in small groups.

According to Braddock and McPartland, (1990) there are alternatives to ability grouping. Their alternatives include giving students extra help by providing additional coaching sessions and peer tutoring services within the regular school schedule. They also suggest that teachers need to be retrained to use teaching methods that actively involve all students from a heterogeneous class in learning activities. Teachers need to give attention to appropriate uses of teacher- and peer-led small groups within the classroom.

SOLUTIONS: BALANCE ACROSS GROUPING ARRANGEMENTS

Teachers should vary their grouping arrangements as they move toward whole group instruction and away from the traditional three-ability groups. There is a great need for balance across classroom grouping arrangements and not a wholesale abandonment of small group instruction in favor of whole groups.

Small cooperative learning groups are useful to practice the skill introduced in a whole group or to review the information presented to check for understanding. Sometimes the teacher can ask a comprehension question of the whole class and the cooperative small groups can caucus, discuss the answer, and then share with the rest of the class. Other cooperative learning tasks include paired reading, peer tutoring, and peer editing of writing assignments.

Additional reasons for continuing to use small groups include meeting to practice specific skills. Specific tasks can be assigned to teacher-led small groups. Other learning tasks can be assigned to instructional centers and stations to provide heterogeneous, small group learning opportunities. Computer-assisted instruction often provides the opportunities for partners to practice the application of a specific comprehension skill.

Teachers should be encouraged to vary their classroom grouping strategies by continuing to assign individual learning activities that are dynamic, integrated and thought-provoking to enable students to learn to read and write by reading, thinking and writing. The purpose of these integrated activities is to improve students' writing skills and to enhance learning by writing in journals and learning logs.

Teachers should balance their grouping strategies by using whole group instruction effectively. For example- whole group instruction can be used to teach themes, skills, ideas, vocabulary, background information, comprehension and writing instruction.

The problem of three-reading groups can be solved with a careful use of a variety of grouping strategies including whole group instruction, teacher-led and peer-led small group instruction and careful selection of individual learning activities.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anderson, R.C., Hiebert, E.H., Scott, J.A., and Wilkerson, I.A.G. (1985). Becoming a Nation of Readers: The report of the Commission on Reading. Washington, DC: National Institute of Education.

Braddock, J.H. and McPartland J.M.. (1990) "Alternatives to Tracking." Educational Leadership 47, No. 7, 76-79.

Goodlad, J. (1983). A Place Called School. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Hiebert, E.H. (1983) "An Examination of Ability Grouping For Reading Instruction." Reading Research Quarterly 18: 231-255.

Hiebert, E.H. and Fisher, C.W.. (1990) "Whole Language: Three Themes for the Future." Educational Leadership 47, No. 6, 62-64.

Kulik, C.L. and Kulik, J.A.. (1982) "Effects of Ability Grouping on Secondary School Students: A Meta-Analysis of Evaluation Findings." American Educational Research Journal 19, 415-428.

Oakes, J. and Lipton, M.. (1990) "Tracking and Ability Grouping: A Structural Barrier to Access and Achievement" in Access to Knowledge: An Agenda For Our Nation's Schools. Goodlad, J. and Keating, P. Editors, New York: The College Board.

Oakes, J. (1987). Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Rosenbaum, J.E, (1980) "Social Implications of Educational Grouping." In Review of Research in Education., edited by D.C. Berliner, 8, 361-401. Washington D.C.: American Educational Research Association.

Slavin, R.E. (1983). Cooperative Learning. New York: Longman.

Slavin, R.E. (1986) Ability Grouping and Student Achievement in Elementary Schools: A Best Evidence Synthesis. Report of the National Center for Effective Elementary Schools. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University.

Stevens, Robert J. et al. (1987) "Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition: Two Field Experiments." Reading Research Quarterly, 21 (4), 435-453.

Webb, N.M. (1982) "Group composition and Group Interaction and Achievement in Small Groups." Journal of Educational Psychology 74: 475-484.